
Guest Editors' Introduction: Understanding Cruelty to Animals

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During the last 40 years, many of society's concerns were focused on the quality of our physical environment and the threats to the integrity and health of that environment. As we enter the next millennium it is becoming clear that societal concerns about the proliferation of violence will be the basis of the next "environmental movement," a movement driven by concern for our psychological environment. Research, debate and discussion about the causes and cures of violence in American society are already part of the discourse of nearly every discipline, from philosophy to criminology to evolutionary biology.

This attention is certainly justified. The United States clearly has a serious violence problem. On an average day, more than 65 people die from homicide, another 18,000 are violently victimized and more than 6,000 of these victims suffer physical injuries (Dobrin, Wiersema, Loftin, & McDowal, 1996). Although Justice Department statistics indicate a recent decline in some of these trends, many analysts regard this as an artifact of the aging of our population, which will be reversed as the next "baby boomlet" enters into violent adolescence in the coming years (Burrell, 1997). Ironically, although much of the focus of concern has been on juvenile crime, the biggest increase in violent crime arrests has been among persons aged 30 to 49, up 245% since 1980. This trend is attributed to increasing criminal charges for domestic violence and drug abuse (Anonymous, 1997).

Society is looking for new tools and resources to employ in efforts to combat violence, including identifying real or potential perpetrators at an early age and defining actions that might prevent violent behavior. One idea that is attracting greater attention as a source of insight into the dynamics of violence is the long-standing belief that the treatment of animals is closely associated with the treatment of fellow human beings. Although the concept has a long intellectual history, scientific and scholarly attention to the idea has been relatively limited (DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983; Ascione, 1993; Lockwood & Ascione, 1997). Closer

examination of animal cruelty within the framework of family and societal violence offers an opportunity to explore violence outside of the traditional “nature-nurture” debate over the origins of aggression. Cruelty to animals represents an objectively definable behavior that occurs within a societal context. It provides an opportunity to measure the interaction of the actions an individual is intrinsically capable of performing and the actions his/her environment have allowed or encouraged. That the definition of animal cruelty is so strongly influenced by cultures and subcultures need not be a confounding variable, but rather an opportunity to try to unravel the many influences that can shape violent behavior.

Analysis of cruelty to animals provides many opportunities for new perspectives on the study of violence, and offers the hope of new insights and solutions. The articles in this issue, like most good research, raise more questions than they answer. We provide here a brief overview of some of the important unanswered and unasked questions in the study of animal cruelty, and the obstacles that need to be overcome in the search for answers.

The Ecology of Violence against Animals

Most good science begins with natural history. Because animal cruelty has traditionally been seen as a minor crime, basic quantitative information as to the nature and extent of animal cruelty has been limited. Good criminological analysis often starts with a solid “victimology”. Arluke and Luke (this volume) and Vermeulen and Odendaal (1993) provide important first steps in filling the void in our knowledge of who victimizes whom. However, further progress will depend on increased standardization in the reporting and tracking of animal cruelty cases around the country. This standardization will make it possible to answer key remaining questions about the victims of abuse. For example, researchers still need to establish the true incidence of various forms of animal abuse and neglect as well as to examine how this victimology varies for different kinds of animals (e.g., by species as well as other factors such as owned vs. stray, and wild vs. tame vs. domestic).

Information about offenders is equally important to gather. What are the demographic attributes of the offenders, as well as the frequency and severity of their acts? How do these demographics (age, sex, culture, urban vs. rural, family size, structure and criminal history) interact with victimology? For example, how closely do the actions of female offenders parallel those of the far more prevalent male offenders? Aggression by children and adolescents is likely to be quite different from aggression committed by adults. Researchers have concentrated on

understanding the former at the expense of the latter. How do crimes against animals committed by children differ from those of adolescents and adults? How does the victimology and offender profile of intentional abuse differ from that of instances of neglect or passive abuse or abandonment? Are these differences relevant in predicting the likelihood of future involvement in violence against humans?

What are the trends in animal cruelty cases (frequency, severity, offender demographics) within specific reporting areas? Can we confirm anecdotal impressions among cruelty investigators that such cases are becoming more frequent, more severe or more likely to involve younger perpetrators? Do these changes mirror trends in other forms of violence such as child abuse and domestic violence? What is the extent of overlap with records of other known violent offenses, particularly interpersonal violence including child abuse and domestic violence?

The Relationship of Animal Cruelty and Human Violence

If we are to use the connections between animal cruelty and other forms of violence in a meaningful way to predict and/or intervene in the progression of violence, we need a much clearer picture of the place of animal abuse in the patterns and progression of an individual's violent behavior. The majority of our understanding of this connection has come from retrospective analysis of institutionalized individuals, such as prisoners, or families in which serious human violence has already occurred (Felthous & Kellert, 1987; Deviney et al., 1983; ten Bensel, Ward, Kruttschnitt, Quigley, & Anderson, 1984). These studies have relied on self-reporting where volunteer samples of adult prisoners have been asked to recall doing harm and violence to animals during childhood — inflicting pain and suffering on a companion animal, wildlife, or livestock.

However large numbers (more than 50 percent) of prisoners typically refuse to cooperate, and those who do participate as subjects may have psychological vested interests in presenting mean and aggressive personae. As a result, they might be expected to exaggerate, or even to fabricate, when discussing the violent sides of their personalities. It should come as no surprise that inmates who are willing to disclose their aggressive activities toward humans are also willing to disclose their aggressive activities toward animals. The relationship between aggressiveness and animal abuse may therefore be more a result of selective disclosure for the sake of self-presentation than anything else. To obtain more valid findings when studying this relationship, researchers need to use prospective designs and non-institutionalized populations.

Armed with these improvements, some time-worn assumptions need to be tested. For example, many people have assumed that animal abusers are likely to progress or graduate to committing violent crimes toward humans. Is there a “trajectory” in the development of interpersonal violence that incorporates animal cruelty? How often is animal abuse truly predictive of escalation and how often is it one manifestation of other forms of *ongoing* violence or antisocial behavior (e.g., bullying). If violence has already progressed to serious or lethal levels, how often do offenders “regress” to violence against animals? How important are frequency, severity and victimology of animal cruelty as measures of potential for progression, rather than as a stage of experimentation with power and control? How important are peer pressure and external influences (drugs, alcohol, access to firearms) in the initiation of animal cruelty and its escalation to other forms of antisocial behavior? What is the role of exposure to media violence against animals in promoting imitation or desensitization to such violence? Are there physiological correlates of animal cruelty (e.g., thrill-seeking, low responsivity to stressful situations) that relate to other possible correlates of antisocial behavior? Does the sexual abuse of animals predict both domestic violence and other serious crimes such as serial rape and homicide?

What factors might “inoculate” an individual against such pressure? What factors are present when animal cruelty does not escalate to other forms of violence? If we recognize that many individuals may engage in some acts of intentional abuse of animals without progressing to other antisocial acts, it becomes essential to attempt to identify the stabilizing influences (internal, familial or societal) that have prevented such a progression. Do such stabilizing influences generalize to the prevention of other antisocial behaviors?

The Dynamics of Victimology

We also need to understand the underlying dynamics of victimology. For example, little is known about the developmental origins of animal cruelty, in particular why many young children experiment with cruelty but do not go on to commit more heinous types of animal abuse. Many young children in American society experience a period in their development where insects, fish, birds, rodents, or even “higher” animals are tortured or killed; ants are deliberately stepped on, birds are shot with BB guns, snakes are beaten with rakes, and fish are left gasping for air after they are caught. At other times, there may be neglectful or misinformed treatment of animals resulting in unnecessary death. Bride (in press) suggests that when it comes to keeping reptiles as companion animals, children may have

inadequate information to care adequately for them and they may die needlessly. Fortunately, the vast majority of children do not continue their cruelty or inappropriate caring practices, although we do not know why this stage is terminal. What do these acts mean to the children who commit them? How do they learn that these acts are wrong and stop committing them? Are they for some children a type of rite of passage out of one stage of early childhood into the next?

For some children and adults, abuse cannot be considered a "normal" developmental stage or youthful indiscretion. What is the meaning and significance of cruelty to them? To answer this question, we need to study the perpetrator's perception of the underlying dynamics of abuse. For example, will the killing of a dog be perceived differently if it is the killer's own dog, a parent or sibling's dog, a stray dog, a newborn puppy, or an aggressive animal that has bitten the perpetrator? Similarly, will the incident be perceived differently if the offender is a 6-year-old, a 12-year-old or adult, or if it is the 1st, 3rd or 20th such incident? Sociologically, we know that these perceptions are important to understand because they enable deviants to take their actions by providing justifications and excuses for their behavior and by redefining the deviant behavior as positive. Much can be learned from the justifications provided for aberrant behavior, even if these explanations may not reflect true motivations.

Going beyond the study of justifications and excuses, researchers have to penetrate the thinking and emotions of animal abusers. To do this, researchers cannot assume that animal abusers are "psychopaths," "cold-blooded killers," or "sadists" thought to act impulsively without reason. Rather than portraying animal cruelty as a symptom of individual psychopathology, we need to make it intelligible by constructing such behavior as ordered and rational, unpacking the abusers' reasoning, logic, and decision-making that informs their actions, just as researchers have done with other criminals such as robbers or murderers (Katz, 1988). If some abusers describe their actions as fun and thrilling, then we need to discover what it means, feels, sounds, tastes, or looks like to abuse and kill animals as a fun and thrilling experience. In short, the development of a general theory of animal cruelty must go beyond narrow, psychological models to include social psychological, and sociological theories of aggression that consider the social meaning of violence (Downes, 1982; Nash, 1996).

Societal Concern and Response to Animal Cruelty

Arluke and Luke (this volume), suggest that most criminal justice and social service professionals, as well as the general public, do not view animal cruelty as a common

problem deserving serious response. Yet this is one of the generally unasked questions. A December 1996 survey of 1,008 American households conducted by Penn & Schoen, Inc. for The Humane Society of the United States found that 42% of respondents believed animal cruelty to be moderately to extremely serious as a problem in this country, compared with 61% responding in this way to “environmental issues” and 78% to “child abuse.” Of those surveyed, 71% supported making animal abuse a felony and 81% felt that the enforcement of animal cruelty laws should be strengthened.

Lack of attention to animal cruelty issues among professions does not appear to be a result of rejection of its importance, but rather a result of either unfamiliarity with the evidence for an association with other violence, or competition with other concerns. Data from Ascione, Weber and Wood (this volume) and others demonstrate that many professions are aware of and concerned about this connection, but have yet to translate that awareness into standardized record-keeping, intake procedures, or policies. Additional information is needed in many areas.

How familiar are professionals in different disciplines (e.g., law enforcement, domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, education, mental health, and clergy) with the possible significance of animal cruelty to the individuals with whom they work? Do they routinely make inquiries about the possible incidence of animal cruelty when seeking information from their clients? Patronek (this volume) explores this question in veterinary medicine.

What is the “baseline” incidence of animal abuse or neglect in families or individuals that might otherwise be considered to be “normal”? Raupp, Barlow, and Oliver (this volume) provide some interesting insights into the general public’s level of familiarity with the potential for animal cruelty as a component of family violence. However, determining this baseline may be problematic because abuse and neglect may not be perceived as such. In some cases, animals may be “disciplined” or controlled by family members in ways they do not define as inappropriate or cruel. Research into domestic violence has long demonstrated the existence of routine and widespread abuse of children in the form of parental discipline. Parents who resorted to physical punishment of children, often for relatively minor behavioral problems, claimed that their actions were justified because they were “disciplining” their “problem” children. There is every reason to believe that a parallel situation exists among companion animal owners who cross the line between reasonable discipline and inappropriate punishment. Some owners may routinely use various forms of punishment under the guise of “discipline” — whether corporal, psychological, or other — to deal with a variety

of behaviors/situations involving their animals. By studying the nature and extent of this phenomenon, the results could be disseminated to alter what now may be a culturally normative practice, at least in particular subgroups of the population.

A different type of definitional problem occurs when society's norms change for the treatment of animals. Carbone's study (this volume) of the controversy over decapitation of rats by scientists is a vivid reminder that the line between acceptable use of and abuse of animals can be shifting and ambiguous. Currently, rat decapitation in research labs is not generally considered to be cruel, but this practice is being reexamined, such that soon rat decapitation may be considered cruel, as it is now considered to deprive primates of maternal care for an extended period (months). As aptly noted by Solot (this volume), researchers need to pay more attention both to societal definitions of cruelty as well as to their own academic use of the term.

What are the obstacles to responding to information regarding the mistreatment of animals? Arluke and Luke (this volume) offer a good model for identifying some of the problems facing those who seek to increase the reporting and prosecution of animal cruelty cases. We need a systematic assessment of why cases involving violence and animals succeed or fail within the criminal justice system.

What is the impact of animal cruelty on society at large? Although owners of abused animals may themselves be victims in such incidents, we know nothing about how they actually perceive and manage these events. Studies of human victims of domestic violence suggest that a corresponding trauma might be experienced by people who themselves are not the direct target of violence but who are close to and responsible for the target victim, as in the case of a mother whose daughter is abused by a boyfriend. Researchers need to ask whether a similar kind of secondary or shared trauma is experienced by companion animal owners when their animals are abused by others. How does the abuse affect not just the owners of the animals that are victimized, but witnesses and other concerned parties? To what extent do instances of animal cruelty undermine feelings of safety and security within a community?

Conversely, we also need to ask how society responds to animal cruelty. For instance, what motivates the frequent outpouring of public concern in high profile animal cruelty cases, when concurrent crimes against people may be ignored? What is the societal impact of labeling someone as an animal abuser?

Law Enforcement Response to Animal Cruelty

Society's response to animal cruelty is reflected in the laws that are enacted and the level of enforcement of those laws. With the recent addition of Texas, 18 states have felony-level provisions within their animal cruelty codes, a dramatic rise from just a decade ago. This reflects both societal pressure to respond to animal cruelty and legislative willingness to accommodate this demand. It is difficult, however, to document law enforcement response since such cases are generally not tracked in any systematic way other than through local humane groups with enforcement authority. Indeed, we cannot even say how many animal abuse and neglect cases are handled on a regional and national basis. More information is needed.

Although local and state police officers are authorized to enforce anticruelty laws, few police officers have the training or expertise to do so. We do not even know whether police officers are aware of the possible connections between animal cruelty and violence against people, or whether this knowledge is integrated into law enforcement's response to domestic violence and community policing. Information about these issues is vital to obtain.

The great majority of such enforcement work is performed by humane society law enforcement officers who investigate cruelty complaints, issue warnings, make court appearances, and pursue prosecutions. While we know basic background and performance statistics about humane officers — such as their ages, gender, length of career, number and types of complaints investigated, etc. — we know nothing about the sociology of their work. For example, what is the socialization process as they move from novice to experienced officer? What kinds of stresses do officers face and how do they manage them? What kinds of practical knowledge and informal techniques do they acquire on the job that guide the way they conduct investigations?

We also need to examine the process of prosecution, whether it is or is not pursued. Given the expense of prosecuting abusers and the uncertain outcomes of court cases, how often are these cases dealt with through education, diversion or other alternative mechanisms and how effective are these means? What is the outcome of cases that clearly involve severe or repeated intentional abuse? How do these outcomes compare with those of crimes of violence against people? What obstacles might prevent the prosecution of cases considered to be "serious"?

Social Service Response to Animal Cruelty

Humane organizations have made significant inroads in alerting social service agencies to regard animal cruelty as a form of family violence that can be both indicative and predictive of other violence. Although only California formally includes animal control officers and state humane officers among mandated reporters of child abuse, many other communities are providing for the cross-training of animal abuse and child abuse investigators or are including humane society representatives in local coalitions against violence. Similarly, Ascione et al. (this volume) have documented growing sensitivity to animal cruelty issues among those responding to the needs of women seeking shelter from domestic violence. To maximize the effectiveness of these bridges between animal and human welfare advocates, we need more information about these cooperative efforts.

How frequently are child or domestic abuse reports filed by humane officers? What proportion are validated and how does this compare with other mandated reports? If few reports are being made by well-trained reporters, what are the obstacles to such reporting?

How routine are inquiries about abuse of companion animals in assessing the needs of women seeking shelter? How widespread are programs to respond to these needs? Do programs that provide for response to those needs increase the likelihood that a victim of abuse will leave earlier in the escalation of violence? What obstacles exist to effectively structuring programs to meet the needs of companion animal-owning victims who are at risk? Ascione et al. (this volume) address many of these potential problems in useful detail.

How important is it to address issues of companion animal loss and separation in meeting the needs of women and children leaving a violent environment? Since companion animals in these households may be both sources of support and victims or scapegoats, these issues may be complex.

Prevention and Intervention

The core assumption of many of the efforts against violence is that earlier detection of predispositions for violence will give the best opportunity for meaningful intervention. However, the lack of standardized programs for detection and intervention has left this concept essentially untested. Many questions remain unasked and unanswered.

Interventions need to be correctly timed and targeted. Does response to severe or repeated animal abuse identify offenders at an early enough stage for successful

intervention? Is this more reliable than other measures of antisocial behavior? What qualities of animal cruelty offenses are the most significant warning flags that intervention is needed? Is it more productive to target “at-risk” groups rather than active offenders?

The design of different interventions need comparison and testing to ensure their effectiveness. What are the most significant objectives for individuals who are recipients of intervention (e.g., self-esteem, communication skills, empathy, anger management)? What are the best short- and long-term measures of successful intervention in dealing with animal-abusing populations? Does pairing offenders or high-risk individuals with non-violent or humane mentors provide greater impact than formal instruction in non-violent skills or humane attitudes? How significant are opportunities for “undoing” harm or being confronted by victims in structuring effective interventions? Do community service or other diversions that involve opportunities for providing restoration to victims have better long-term results than interventions which are only punitive?

How important is it for animals to be involved in prevention and intervention programs? Can nurturing and other prosocial skills be taught in other ways (e.g., gardening projects)? When is use of animals contraindicated? Are there patterns of violent history that should not be addressed through animal-assisted therapy or animal-assisted activities?

Answers to many of these questions will require the cooperation of individuals and agencies from many different disciplines. They will also require a true prospective approach, identifying individuals involved in animal cruelty at the earliest possible stage and tracking the influences that prevent or promote the escalation to other forms of violent behavior. Violence makes victims of us all, and all segments of the community that deal with health and safety, kindness and cruelty, people and animals, must constantly find ways to build the connections that will make it possible to end this victimization.

Understanding our complex relationships with animals is starting to provide us with an impressive range of new resources in the campaign to reduce or eliminate violence, cruelty, and victimization. Incorporating our understanding of these relationships into problems of violence unites our concerns for the damage to our physical and psychological environment. It will be by seeing ourselves as a part of nature and not apart from it that we may draw strength and satisfaction. It is by seeing ourselves as connected to families and communities and not as controlled by them, that we reduce the need for violence.

Note

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